"From Magic to Liturgy: A Comparative Historical Overview of Ritual Practice in the Ancient Mediterranean and Early Christianity"

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Abstract:

This paper offers a concise historical and anthropological overview of ritual and liturgy from the ancient Mediterranean world to the formation of Christian worship. It begins by defining ritual as a redundant and highly formalised sequence of gestures and words through which human societies seek to impose order upon the chaos of time, contingency, and death. Drawing on classic debates on magic, guilt, witchcraft and sorcery, the study challenges evolutionist hierarchies that place magic at the "lowest" rung of human thought, and instead presents magic, religion, and science as coexisting modes of abstraction. The analysis then turns to the complex interplay of magic and institutional religion in Greece, Rome, and Egypt, with particular attention to sacrifice, divination, and the social function of accusations of witchcraft. A detailed comparison between Roman and Greek sacrificial structures highlights divergent cosmologies and conceptions of the relationship between humans and the divine. Finally, the paper traces the emergence and consolidation of Christian liturgy—especially the Eucharist and the doctrine of transubstantiation—showing both continuity and rupture with ancient ritual patterns. The study aims to provide a theoretical and historical framework useful for the comparative analysis of later liturgical systems and contemporary reinterpretations of ritual.

Keywords: liturgy, ritual, anthropology, history of religions, religious celebration, sacrifice

From Rite to Celebration

Whether we are dealing with magic, liturgy, or a significant transitional moment in an individual's life, ritual is an indispensable element for the human being, who has always made extensive use of it both on a religious and on a social level.

It is therefore fundamental, at this initial stage of our study into the liturgical world, to define what a rite actually is in a manner as academic as possible, and only subsequently to enter into the specific case of liturgy and its history.

Ritual, as reported by Michael Herfeld, may be considered a repetitive instrument employed by human beings to oppose degeneration[1]. One of the primary characteristics of ritual is thus redundancy, namely the monotonous repetition of gestures and words.
With regard to language, we must also underline how it is fundamentally simplified and how it rarely refers to things in the concrete world. A first possible definition of ritual, therefore, is the following:

"Ritual is a particular moment with an initial phase, a central phase and a final phase, a complete story or a chapter of the monumental work that is society. This possibility allows us to take distance, even if only briefly, from the terrible indifference contained in the continuous line that arises from social routines without a beginning and without an end."[2]

At the basis of every human ritual we thus find the extreme attempt to impose order where chaos would otherwise reign. The main archetype to which ritual refers is clearly the inexorable passage of time and, consequently, death[3]. The gestural and linguistic redundancy that constitutes the primary element of ritual serves the individual to impose order in a world saturated with incomprehensible events, of which death is the absolute apex.
It must also be noted that, although ritual generally refers to a cosmological vision with propitiatory or apotropaic functions, its social function should not be ignored. Max Gluckman[4] pointed out that ritual has always also had a social function that is useful to power in maintaining the status quo.
Without adopting such a strictly teleological perspective, it is nonetheless appropriate to recognize ritual's functionality as a mechanism of control within those States that we might define as totalitarian.
Ritual, in itself, is therefore something that can be employed both in the religious and in the social sphere and that possesses certain specific characteristics, chiefly the redundancy (i.e. repetitiveness) of actions and the extreme simplification of both verbal and symbolic language.
There is, however, another field in which ritual enjoys particular diffusion and which is, perhaps, the area where today the word *ritual* is most frequently employed outside anthropological discourse: magic.

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[1] S. Allovio, G. Mangiameli, L. Ciabarri, *Antropologia culturale: i temi fondamentali*, Cortina, Milano 2018, p.188

[2] R. Da Matta, *Carnival, Rogues and Heroes. An interpretation of the Brazilian Dylemma,* University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame 1991, p.23. English translation by the author.

[3] cfr. E. De Martino, *Il mondo magico (1948),* Einaudi, Torino 2022 and E. De Martino, *Morte e piano rituale (1958),* Einaudi, Torino 2021

[4] M. Gluckman, *Potere, diritto e rituale nelle società tribali,* Boringhieri, Torino 1977

Magic and Ritual

Much has been written about magic, and this is precisely why, unlike most of our colleagues, we will not approach the question of magic from a spiritual standpoint, but will instead remain within the boundaries of the anthropological context, providing as academically grounded a view as possible of this phenomenon.

Magic is, without doubt, one of the great themes of anthropology: its religious function and social implications have been the subject of numerous anthropological studies across the world. But what is meant, academically, by *magic*?

For anthropology, the concept of magic is inevitably associated with the concept of guilt.

Guilt was already discussed by René Girard, the French literary critic and philosopher, in relation to his theory of the scapegoat[5].

In short, Girard's theory is based—according to the author—on anthropological as well as literary evidence that every human society, from the dawn of time, has always been characterized by a mimetic process definable as triangular desire. In brief, each individual, in their social life, adopts models to imitate. Imitation is justified by a simple desire for possession: the imitator wants that which the imitated possesses. The imitated, however, can be of two types: near or distant. We call *distant* those models that do not belong to the same social context as the imitator and therefore cannot take part in the struggle for possession. By *near* we mean those models which, belonging to the same social context as the imitator, do take part in this struggle for material goods. This struggle soon extends to the family groups of the two subjects and then, exponentially, to the whole social group.

Designating a scapegoat thus means attributing the responsibility for a social crisis—often incomprehensible—in order to suspend it; in other words, assigning guilt to a third party, selected from among the members of society precisely because they are weak and vulnerable.

It is clear that the basis of this theory lies in the idea that human behavior is fundamentally imitative; an idea taken up in the Italian academic world also by Professor Gianfranco Mormino, who has attempted in his publications to provide as scientific a justification as possible for the process of imitation[6].

The idea that accusations of witchcraft might in some way be associated with the concept of guilt described above (albeit not necessarily in a strictly Girardian sense) derives from the consideration,

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5 cfr. R. Girard, *Il capro espiatorio (1982),* Adelphi, Milano 1999

6 G. Mormino, *Per una teoria dell'imitazione,* Cortina, Milano 2016

advanced by the philosopher J. L. Austin[7], that justification presupposes ideas belonging to a relation of causality which, taken together, allow an individual to escape guilt and responsibility. That is to say that guilt and responsibility are assigned to a subject for purely political purposes[8].

But how does witchcraft fit into this complex of ideas?

Fundamentally, witchcraft is introduced into society in order to elude guilt. A witch—who is, in essence, unaware of being such[9]—is accused in a circumstantial manner by others so that they may avoid taking responsibility in matters economic, social, or concerning their own physical health.

As Argyrou[10] emphasizes, it is not important that individuals genuinely believe in a form of black magic: what matters is simply that they remove guilt from themselves, without overturning social order through direct accusation of a third party. This theory is supported by eminent anthropologists such as Evans-Pritchard, who observed similar behavior among the African population of the Azande[11]. In short, accusations of witchcraft are anthropologically recognized almost universally as a social glue that prevents society from imploding into a kind of *bellum omnium contra omnes*.

Returning to the thread of our argument, we may say that *magic* can be defined as that anthropological category which includes both witchcraft, universally recognized as involuntary, and *sorcery*, which by contrast implies an element of intentionality on the part of the sorcerer.

From a purely evolutionist standpoint, some authors, including the legendary J. G. Frazer, have regarded magic as the first stage of human abstract thought[12], placing it at the lowest rung of a value scale, prior to religious and scientific thought.

However, to consider magical belief as occupying the lowest step of an evolutionary hierarchy of human abstract thought is, today, considered academically unsound: magic, religion and science are not mutually exclusive perspectives, but rather abstractions of the human intellect that must be read as interpenetrating and even overlapping[13].

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7 J.L. Austin, "A plea for excuses", in C. Lyas (curated by), *Philosophy and Linguistic,* Macmillan, London 1971, pp.79-101

8 S. Allovio, G. Mangiameli, L. Ciabarri, *Antropologia culturale: i temi fondamentali*, Cortina, Milano 2018, p.180

9 Note how the idea of witchcraft is anthropologically different from the idea of sorcery. The former, in fact, doesn't imply a voluntary action by the subject, while the latter always implies a ritual and practical involvement of the acting subject. In this regard, please cfr. S. Allovio, G. Mangiameli, L. Ciabarri, *Antropologia culturale: i temi fondamentali*, Cortina, Milano 2018, pp.197sgg.

10 V. Argyrou, "Under a spell. The strategic use of magic in Greek Cypriot society" in *American Ethnologist,* 20, 2, 1993, pp.256-271

11 cfr. E. Pritchard, *Stregoneria, oracoli e magia tra gli Azande (1937),* Cortina, Milano 2001

12 J. G. Frazer, *Il ramo d'oro (1980),* Bollati-Boringhieri, Torino 2012

13 In this regard, cfr. L. Wittgenstein, *Note sul ramo d'oro di Frazer,* Adelphi, Milano 1975

The first step we must take in order to approach the concept of rituality and thus liturgy, is therefore to abandon any ethnocentric and evolutionary vision.

The fact that a society places the scientific method at the center of its superstructure is not, in short, a sign of greater "evolution", just as the fact that a society places magical thought at its core is not a sign of a lack of evolution. These three elements are not, therefore, rungs of a value ladder in which one constitutes the lowest and another the highest step, but rather structural and compenetrated factors of our living in society.

At the base of magic, as of religion and science, lies the need to know the world that surrounds us, but above all the need to avoid the imputation of guilt and thus the almost instinctive necessity to maintain social cohesion.

From an anthropological standpoint we may indeed affirm that ritual is always connected to a cosmogony and therefore to a theology; on the other hand, we must recognize that in many cases of rites of passage in the Western world we are dealing with fully secularized events, that is, events that have lost any religious or metaphysical meaning.

Leaving aside the specific case of liturgical ritual, which we will examine in subsequent sections, we must also stress that ritual possesses an intrinsically magical–metaphysical valence, while at the same time maintaining intrinsic coherence with the religious system to which it belongs.

In short, from a strictly academic standpoint we can assert with certainty that two elements are central in arriving at a possible definition of the word *ritual*: the redundancy of gestures and words, and its insertion within a religious–theological system.

Precisely by virtue of these two elements, we may therefore affirm with certainty that in the specific case of liturgy we are dealing with a form of ritual which, although it has lost, as we shall see, much of its original magical references, continues to retain its primary characteristics.

Magic and Religion: The Origins of Liturgy

Broadly speaking, we may say that the ancient world differed greatly from our own in terms of ritual, both from a magical and a liturgical perspective.

The advent of Christianity and its related liturgy imposed a substantial change of paradigm in the performance of ritual, to the point that almost nothing remains of the ancient modes of celebration.

In order to emphasise this difference, in this section we will limit our analysis to the classical world, and in particular to that area of the Mediterranean basin which embraces Greece, Egypt and Italy, already examined in our previous study of serpent symbolism[14]. The way these peoples viewed

[14] S. Sannino, *The Serpent in Mediterranean and Near Eastern Religious Thought: Toward an Ophidian Interpretation,* DOI 10.5281/zenodo.17621034

"sacred things" is useful for understanding the cultural premises of liturgy as we understand it today.

In a world where the sacred was part of daily life and where magic and institutionalized religion existed in symbiosis[15], it was entirely normal that the celebration of ritual should be substantially different from contemporary Christian practice.

One of the authors who most influenced the anthropological community in its approach to witchcraft, magic and ritual was undoubtedly the British scholar Rodney Needham. According to Needham, magic represented an exemplary case study in the attempt to identify some peculiar characteristics of human culture[16]. He held that, starting from the study of certain primary components of human experience (hot, cold, dry, moist, colours, sounds, and so forth), it would be possible to adopt a comparative stance in the study of the principal cultural elements of humanity, among which witchcraft[17] occupies a special place.

In this way, he argued, it would be possible to reconstruct a universally valid image of the witch. Yet although the English anthropologist pursued this study in search of certain primary elements of human culture, such an approach nonetheless allows us to undertake a study of the witch and witchcraft that reconstructs as reliably as possible the cultural image of witchcraft within the society under consideration.

With regard to magical practice, the ancient world possessed a rather complex and at times even contradictory vision. On the one hand, magic was a founding element of institutionalized religion, as in the case of Greece[18] or Egypt[19]; on the other, it might take on a negative and frightening connotation, as reported by Pliny in the case of the *striges*:

"As for the tales told about the *striges,* that they offer their breasts to the lips of infants, I regard them as fabulous. It is agreed that the *strix* is already present in ancient maledictions, but I do not believe that there is any certainty as to what bird is meant."[20]

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15 cfr. G. Luck (curated by), *Arcana Mundi vol.I: magia, miracoli, demonologia,* Fondazione Lorenzo Valla, Milano 2010

16 M. Bettini, W. Short (a cura di), *Con i Romani: un'antropologia della cultura antica,* Il Mulino, Bologna 2014, p.127

17 R. Needham, *Caratteri Primordiale (1978),* Medusa Edizioni, Milano 2006, p.64

18 cfr. G. Luck (curated by), *Arcana Mundi vol.I: magia, miracoli, demonologia,* Fondazione Lorenzo Valla, Milano 2010, pp.11-76

19 cfr. A. Erman, *La religione degli Egizi,* Ghibli, Milano 2020, pp.169-186

20 Plinio, *Naturalis Historia,* 11.132. English translation by the author.

An infanticidal and nocturnal creature, the Roman *strix* is thus a being with an unequivocally negative connotation. The term itself would seem to refer to their habit of "screeching horribly" (*horrenda stridere*)[21] in the night[22].

Another practice generally considered negative and therefore banned by Roman law was that of the *tabellae defixionum*, a particular form of curse that consisted in writing a magical formula on small lead or metal tablets. Through this practice one believed it possible to consign a person's life and soul to chthonic powers[23].

Their use covers a broader time frame than that of the Magical Papyri: the earliest attestations date to the fifth century BCE, while the latest are from around the fifth century CE. As studies report, the structure of these tablets was very simple: "X binds Y, whose mother is Z", where the first term was almost always a god (usually Greek) or a demon, while the second was the name of the victim[24].

Fundamentally different was the perception of magic, and in particular of *mantikē* (divination), in ancient Greece. The art of foretelling the future was not, in fact, the prerogative of individual prophets or charlatans, but was also recognized by institutional religion, as in the case of the Pythia of Delphi:

"The method of divination practised at Delphi by the Pythia, the priestess–prophetess who sat at the edge of a deep chasm and received from the earth her trance and visions, had nothing in common with the cult of the god Apollo. She was a medium who received impulses and messages from the Great Mother, to whom the future of the earth and of all humanity was of course known. The trance, the ecstasy of the priestess, her incomprehensible language (probably not dissimilar to the glossolalia of the early Christians) were foreign to the entire myth of Apollo and to any form of cult as we understand it, but the oracle was so ancient that the priests of Apollo continued to make use of it, transforming it […] into a religious centre."[25]

Precisely because of this profound intersection between religion and magic, we may consider the latter a particular form of the former, devoted to different ends and means depending on the culture in question. Ancient magi were dedicated to the manipulation of the *dynameis* (forces) of nature.

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21 M. Bettini, W. Short (curated by), *Con i Romani: un'antropologia della cultura antica,* Il Mulino, Bologna 2014, p.137

22 Isidoro, *Etymologiae,* 12.7.42

23 cfr. G. Luck (curated by), *Arcana Mundi vol.I: magia, miracoli, demonologia,* Fondazione Lorenzo Valla, Milano 2010, p.26

24 ibid.

25 ibid. p.11. English translation by the author.

Magicians were therefore not unfamiliar with techniques employed by priests or the devout within religious contexts: continuous prayer, sleep deprivation and fasting were indispensable practices for both categories in order to obtain the favour and revelations of the gods.

The great popularity of magic in the Hellenic world meant that it also became one of the favourite themes of literature: from Homer[26] to Euripides[27], from Apollonius of Rhodes[28] to Plato[29], numerous authors addressed this subject in their works, albeit in different forms and senses.

Theocritus too, in describing life in the city of Alexandria, speaks of the *pharmakeútriai*, the feminine equivalent of the *pharmakeutai* (enchanters, magicians)[30]. This term derives from the well-known Greek word *phármakon*, which in Ophidism has a central importance.

The word, capable of indicating both poison and remedy, was particularly suited to naming any type of herb, infusion, ointment or remedy used in medicine as well as in magic or even religious practices.

To underline an even greater difference between the Hellenic and the Roman outlook, we should recall how many of the authors and thinkers who contributed to the birth of philosophy and science considered themselves in some way magicians. Suffice it to mention, in this regard, Pythagoras or Empedocles.

Magic then spread widely during the Hellenistic period thanks to the encounter between Greek and Egyptian culture. Hosts of curious visitors and scholars from Greece travelled to the great cities of Egypt, especially to colossal Alexandria, drawn by that strange people who made magic a genuinely religious practice.

In Egypt, even more than in Greece, the social fabric was so saturated with magical and astrological beliefs that the entire country appeared magical and mysterious in the eyes of other peoples.

The Magical Papyri examined by Cumont[31], for example, provide us with a snapshot of the beliefs and superstitions of the people of Egypt at that time. Although the dating[32] of the Magical Papyri is relatively late (third–fourth centuries CE), they reflect far older beliefs and doctrines. Despite the great number of lines contained in these ancient documents, there is no doubt that a large portion of

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26 cfr. Homer, *Odyssey*, any edition

27 Euripides, *Medea*

28 Apollonius of Rhodes, *Argonauts*

29 Plato, *Timaeus*

30 G. Luck (curated by), *Arcana Mundi vol.I: magia, miracoli, demonologia,* Fondazione Lorenzo Valla, Milano 2010, pp.21

31 F. Cumont, *L'Egypte des astrologues,* Bruxelles 1937

32 G. Luck (curated by), *Arcana Mundi vol.I: magia, miracoli, demonologia,* Fondazione Lorenzo Valla, Milano 2010, p.24

the relevant literature has been lost: Paul, for instance, had the inhabitants of Ephesus—one of the principal centres of magic in the Hellenistic period—burn their books[33].

The importance of Ephesus is also attested by the expression *Ephesia grammata*, translatable from Greek as "Ephesian words", that is, "magical words"[34].

It is thus a historical certainty that much of the literature we might have had at our disposal to analyse the subject was destroyed with the advent and diffusion of Christianity. Nonetheless, thanks to the Magical Papyri and the careful work of numerous anthropologists and historians, we are still able to form a sufficiently clear picture of the general context of beliefs concerning magic and religion in the ancient world.

In contrast to what happens today, magic and religion in antiquity were two sides of the same coin, in which the existence of one necessitated the existence of the other. There was often no real discontinuity between these two practices, since both were perceived as means available to human beings to perceive and connect with the divine. Religion, more initiatory and practical than contemporary Christianity, was thus imbued with magical beliefs and customs, to the point that many of the richest and most famous sanctuaries in the ancient world were also nerve centres for the practice of *mantikē* or magic more generally.

Only in Rome do we see a firmer diffidence towards magic, although in practice magic was still regularly employed in the *Urbs* by both private citizens and professionals, handsomely paid to invoke fortune or misfortune upon unsuspecting victims.

Religious Celebration in the Ancient World

In our attempt to reconstruct a brief but effective history of religious celebration, we cannot avoid analysing the structure such celebrations assumed in the ancient world, and in particular within classical culture. Specifically, we shall examine the anthropological category of sacrifice, which, without doubt, has remained—albeit symbolically—present within Christian liturgy as well.

When we speak of sacrifice, it is quite normal to begin from the Christian sense, which links this concept to the categories of privation and suffering[35]. But what is a sacrifice in reality?

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33 A.A.V.V., *The Bible*, Act. Ap. 19,18-20

34 G. Luck (curated by), *Arcana Mundi vol.I: magia, miracoli, demonologia,* Fondazione Lorenzo Valla, Milano 2010, pp.25

35 M. Bettini, W. Short (curated by), *Con i Romani: un'antropologia della cultura antica,* Il Mulino, Bologna 2014, p.107

According to Toutain[36], the Latin term *sacrificium* designates all those rites in which an object is made sacred. More generally, we can affirm that *sacrificia* are those rituals in which an object, animate or inanimate, offered to a divinity by an individual or a community on or near an altar, is killed, burned, or destroyed totally or partially[37].

For Toutain, sacrifice is not to be considered, as Smith, Mauss and Hubert did, an object in itself, but rather as an action which only assumes the meaning of "sacrifice" within a given culture. What counted as *sacrificium* for the Romans did not automatically correspond to the same concept for the Greeks.

Contrary to what is often supposed even today in certain circles, sacrifice is not something universally identical across cultures, and we would undoubtedly be mistaken if we were to unify the narrative even in the present attempt at analysis.

It seems more appropriate, therefore, to focus our attention on the Roman world, which is culturally closer to us and certainly more influential on the development of Christian liturgy as we know it today.

It is crucial, then, to understand as fully as possible how a Roman celebration was structured in order to trace any survivals in modern celebrations. In Rome, sacrifices were distinguished in three categories: honorific sacrifices, involving the *hostiae honorariae*; expiatory sacrifices, involving *hostiae piaculares*; and divinatory sacrifices, in which *hostiae consultatoriae* were employed.

In contrast to this precise distinction, we have not been handed down a single, uniform structure of sacrifice. Anthropologists[38] have therefore attempted to reconstruct it using literary sources of various kinds.

In this way we are able to form a clear and distinct picture of Roman sacrifice and its structure, which turns out to be rather complex even when compared with modern Christian liturgy.

First of all, the animals to be sacrificed were selected. This selection was made according to various criteria: for public rites, bovines or large animals were sacrificed, while smaller animals were used for private or less solemn rites[39].

This was followed by a procession in which the victims were brought to the place of ritual together with all the instruments that would be employed. In front of the altar, the ritual of the *praefatio* was

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36 J. Toutain, *Sacrificium* in Daremberg e Saglio "Dictionnaire des Antiquités graeques et romaines" vol.IV 2, 1911, pp.273-280

37 M. Bettini, W. Short (a cura di), *Con i Romani: un'antropologia della cultura antica,* Il Mulino, Bologna 2014, p.108

38 cfr. F. Prescendi, *Décrire et comprendre le sacrifice: les réflexions des Romains sur leur propre religion à partir de la littérature antiquaire,* in "Mythos" vol.II, Stuttgart 2007

39 M. Bettini, W. Short (curated by), *Con i Romani: un'antropologia della cultura antica,* Il Mulino, Bologna 2014, p.110

performed, a food or incense offering made to the gods with the explicit aim of inviting them to partake of the animal offered in sacrifice.

The phase of the *immolatio* then followed, during which the officiant poured wine and *mola salsa* over the head of the animal, from which this ritual act took its name. The officiant then passed a knife—held by the flat of the blade—along the animal's back, from head to tail. This solemn act served to further consecrate the beast to its ritual purpose.

The actual killing, however, was carried out by slaves, as was the dismemberment of the animal, which served to check that all the organs were in their proper place. The presence of the organs in the correct position was a sign of *pax deorum* and thus of the gods' acceptance of the sacrifice.

The body was then divided into two portions: one, composed of the *exta* or entrails, was reserved for the gods; the other was destined for the human banquet or, more rarely, sold on in the city's butcheries.

As we have already noted, the term *sacrificium* was used to indicate the sacralisation of an object through a ritual act. There is thus a true passage of ownership of the object from the human to the divine sphere, as highlighted also by Trebatius Testa, contemporary and interlocutor of Cicero, in his treatise *De religionibus*[40].

The act of sacrifice was not indicated solely by the Latin term just discussed; at times it might also be represented by the word *immolatio*, already encountered above. In this case we are dealing with a synecdoche, for the term did not originally indicate the whole act, but only a specific section of the sacrifice itself.

This distinction survives in the Italian language, where the verbs *immolare* or *immolarsi* are regularly used as synonyms of *sacrificare* and *sacrificarsi*.

The importance of *immolatio* is, however, not common to all classical cultures: in Greece, the focus of the ritual was on the act of killing itself, whereas in Rome, precisely due to the presence of *immolatio*, it is easy to deduce that the central role was accorded to the moment immediately preceding the animal's death.

If, in the Roman celebration, great attention was paid to the moment in which the priest passed the ritual blade along the animal's back, in the Greek world things took a different course: first, the priest poured a mixture of water and barley in front of himself, thus sprinkling the place of sacrifice. This gesture, unlike the unction with *mola salsa* already discussed, did not serve to consecrate the victim, but rather to purify it[41].

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40 T. Testa, *De religionibus,* in Macrobio "Saturnalia", 3.3.2

41 J. Rudhart, *Essai sur la religion grecque & recherches sur les hymnes orphiques (1958),* Presses universitaires de Liège, 2013, pp.259-260

Following this phase of purification, the priest would cut a lock of hair from the animal's head and cast it into the fire: once again, we are dealing with a gesture with no direct relation to the Roman *immolatio*. In short, contact between the divine and human world did not occur through consecration, but through the act of killing itself, as signalled by the *ololygē*, or ritual cry, with which the women marked the moment in which the two realities—physical and metaphysical—finally touched[42].

Even more interesting is the observation that the *immolatio* was associated with a real manifestation of the metaphysical upon the physical plane. According to Quintus[43], brother and interlocutor in Cicero's philosophical dialogue *De divinatione*, it was precisely during the *immolatio* that malformations in the internal organs of the animal could appear.

The fact that such malformations were believed to arise specifically at this precise moment is logically deduced from the evidence that, if they had been present from birth, they would have prevented the animal from living.

For the Romans, therefore, it was normal to believe that malformation was the product of a divine intervention upon the physical plane, mediated through the performance of a sacred act. The same idea is found in Seneca, even though the philosopher does not explicitly mention *immolatio*.

It was thus widely believed that the gods could alter the morphology and arrangement of an animal's entrails, as described in a macabre passage by Lucan[44] in which a seer, confronted with the monstrousness of a bull's entrails, declares: «nec enim tibi, summe, litavi, / Iuppiter, hoc sacrum, caesique in pectora tauri /inferni venere dei».[45]

The idea that the gods could take possession of the sacrificial victim's body is also taken up by Arnobius[46], who wonders about the possibility that the gods Mellonia and Limentinus might enter the intestines of victims.

Another aspect worth highlighting, in view of our analysis of Christian and Ophidian liturgy, is the final banquet and, more precisely, the distinction between *hostia* and *victima*.

Although in some works these two terms are used for the same animals, this synonymy is not to be understood as universal. In practice, the term *hostia* was employed for a neutral sacrificial animal, often in relation to minor offerings. The term *victima*, by contrast, designated more costly, and thus,

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42 M. Bettini, W. Short (curated by), *Con i Romani: un'antropologia della cultura antica,* Il Mulino, Bologna 2014, p.113

43 Cicero, *De Divinatione*, 1.118-119

44 Lucan, *Bellum Civile*, 1.609-638

45 ibid. 1.632-634

46 Arnobius, *Adversus Nationes,* 4.12

by extension, superior offerings. This difference emerges in Horace[47], where the *victima* is defined as a *sumptuous hostia*.

The economic difference between these two types of animals is also highlighted by Marcus Cornelius Fronto[48], who explains: *victima maior, hostia minor*.

Equally interesting is the theory of Ovid[49], later taken up by Servius[50], according to which this distinction originated in two different types of sacrifice. Starting from an etymological analysis of *hostia*, the two authors supposed a connection with *hostes*, "enemy". Thus, the sacrifice designated as *hostia* might be linked to the military world and therefore, by extension, to less lavish and poorer offerings. There is, however, no historical proof of this hypothesis.

It should be noted that originally the term *hostis* did not mean "enemy" but "foreigner with equal legal rights to the Roman citizen"[51], with whom the latter was therefore authorised to establish relations of commercial exchange and mutual respect.

It is not difficult to imagine that such agreements were finalized in moments of conviviality, during which meat might well be consumed.

The consumption of meat was, at least in antiquity, inseparably bound to sacrifice and religious celebration[52]: hence the term *hostia*, indicating an animal eaten at such banquets in the presence of the *hostes*.

But to what end were such rituals and sacrifices practised in the ancient world?

Providing an exhaustive answer to this question is not easy, but a possible solution may be found in the ancient sources. According to Servius: «hostia vero victima et dicta quod dii per illam hostiantur, id est aequi et propitii reddantur, undem hostimentum aequationem»[53]

The *hostia* thus served to render the gods "just and propitious", that is, favourable to human requests. There was therefore a clear analogy between the relationship between *cives* and *hostes* and that between citizens and gods.

Indeed, the banquet following the sacrifice was intended both for the gods, through the use of the *exta*, and for human beings through the *viscera*.

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47 Horace, *Carmina*, 3.23.12, 18

48 M.C. Fronto, *De differentiis*, 532

49 Ovid, *Fasti*, 1.335-336

50 Servius, *Commentarius in Aeneidem,* 1.334

51 Benveniste, *Il vocabolario delle istituzioni indoeuropee: economia, parentela, società,* Einaudi, Torino 2001, pp.64-75

52 M. Bettini, W. Short (curated by), *Con i Romani: un'antropologia della cultura antica,* Il Mulino, Bologna 2014, p.115

53 Servius, *Commentarius in Aeneidem, 2.156*

Servius defines *viscera* as "everything that is found between the bones and the skin"[54], that is, flesh in general, stripped of the entrails, reserved for the gods. The entrails offered to the gods were considered the tastiest part of the animal, to the extent that the term *exta* might derive from *extare*, "to protrude", "to stand out in importance"[55].

To this we may add the fact that the *exta* were often accompanied by supplementary offerings, called *magmenta* and *augmenta*. In both cases we are dealing with pieces of the animal's flesh added to the entrails to represent the totality of the victim sacrificed in honour of the gods. Varro notes that the *augmentum* was placed upon the liver of the *victima* to "increase it".

The *magmenta*, on the other hand, seem to derive from *magis*, such that the author says of them: «quod ad religionem magis pertinet»[56]

The difference between these two supplementary offerings was thus two-fold: on the one hand, the *augmentum* did not have a strictly religious character and was therefore burned together with the entrails; on the other, the *magmentum* had a specifically religious significance and was deposited in special temples[57].

To understand the ultimate purpose of these practices, it is useful to analyse briefly the etymology of the verb *mactare*, already distinguished in antiquity from the verb *immolare*[58].

In the first case, as already mentioned, the verb would derive from *mola salsa*, that mixture of wine and salted flour poured directly onto the animal's back before its death. In the second, we are dealing with a verb whose adjectival form *mactus* would share the same root as *magnus* (*mag-*). The verb *mactare* is therefore closely connected to the idea of increase, as also demonstrated by certain formulas, among which that of Cato stands out: *macte hisce suovitaurilibus lactentibus esto* ("be increased by these suckling suovetaurilia").[59]

A brief answer to our question on the purpose of ancient rituals, one that goes beyond the generic and traditional adjectives *apotropaic* or *propitiatory*, may thus be found precisely in the concept of *augmentation*. The Romans were convinced that, through sacrifice and the banquet on the *victima*, the gods increased their own power.

The Greek world, by contrast, presented a substantially different picture. There, the sacrifice offered to the gods did not consist, as in Rome, of the *exta*, but rather of the animal's flesh, to which pieces

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54 ibid. 6.253

55 cfr. P. Diaconus, *De verborum significatu*

56 Varo, *De lingua latina*, 5.112

57 M. Bettini, W. Short (curated by), *Con i Romani: un'antropologia della cultura antica,* Il Mulino, Bologna 2014, p.117

58 Suetonius, *Prata*, fr.176

59 Cato, *De Agricoltura*, 141.3

of other parts of the body were added, in a way similar to the Roman *augmentum* and *magmentum*[60]. The essential difference lies in the fact that it was not the *splánchna* (internal organs) that were offered, but the flesh itself. The entrails did play a role, but they were burned together with the other portions of meat. The verb *thýein* ("to sacrifice") would originally refer to the rising movement of the smoke produced by the combustion of these offerings[61].

Though we may identify some structural similarities, what should strike us above all is the fundamentally different cosmological conception underlying the two approaches.

Roman sacrifice, strictly divided between gods and humans, establishes a severe hierarchy between these two worlds. Greek sacrifice, on the other hand, does not reproduce such a division; its absence is embodied in the banquet shared by gods and men[62].

With this observation we have reached the end of our preliminary examination of religious and sacrificial ritual in the ancient world, even though it is essentially impossible to provide a detailed explanation within the limited scope of this publication. With the elements treated and analysed here, however, we should have laid the foundations for a deeper understanding not only of Christian liturgy, but also of ophidian celebration, which seeks to encapsulate within itself a precise symbolism and will be the subject of the following publications.

Liturgy in the Christian World

The term *liturgy* derives from the Greek *leitourgía*, from *leiton* (place of public affairs) and *érgon* (work). In early Christian culture it was used to indicate, following the Hebrew tradition, "service in the temple".

Liturgy is therefore, even etymologically, a public service performed in the sacred space of a place of worship by an appointed minister in the presence of the entire congregation.

Aside from etymology, however, we may associate the term *liturgy* with *religious celebration*, since both are connected to the creation of a bond between the human and the extra-human.

In this section, therefore, we will offer a brief history of liturgy as understood in the Christian world and focus in particular on those elements that can also be found in the ancient celebrations of the classical world, so as to equip ourselves with the necessary tools for a deeper and more fruitful understanding of the ophidian liturgical vision in future publications.

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60 In this regard, cfr. Homer, *Odyssey*, 3.418-472

61 J. Rudhart, *Essai sur la religion grecque & recherches sur les hymnes orphiques (1958),* Presses universitaires de Liège, 2013, pp.263

62 M. Bettini, W. Short (curated by), *Con i Romani: un'antropologia della cultura antica,* Il Mulino, Bologna 2014, p.119

In studying the origins of Christian liturgy, we must not forget that, at least originally, Christianity was an illegal cult in Rome. The illegality of the cult and the consequent impossibility of gathering in community celebrations naturally influenced the early stages of liturgy, which was accordingly very simple in its structure.

The cult was originally composed of the reading of Scripture, prayers, and psalms, but it did not yet possess a liturgical celebration as we conceive of it today. The structure of the celebration was fundamentally inherited from Judaism, with the exception of the Eucharist, introduced directly by Jesus of Nazareth among his disciples[63].

To this day we do not know exactly how the liturgical celebration was constituted in the apostolic period, but thanks to an ancient source we know that the epitome of this celebration was the breaking of bread[64]. It is certain, therefore, that at least the Eucharistic celebration was not only the culminating part of religious worship, but that even in the earliest Christian period there existed a precise description of how it was to be performed and which hymns and prayers were to accompany it.

The early phases of Christian liturgy also saw numerous changes in those community celebrations that were not held on a weekly basis, but on specific occasions such as baptism. From some ancient sources we know that originally the Eucharist performed during the baptismal liturgy was part of a genuine communal meal; this meal, however, often led to disorder[65] and was therefore separated from and eventually removed from the Eucharistic celebration[66].

Similarly, the definition of what is now known as the liturgical year required a series of adjustments: in this case too, the need for a series of strictly observed annual festivals was inherited from Judaism. Nonetheless, the liturgical year did not reach completion until the sixth century CE, and even the most important festivities, such as Christmas and the Epiphany, were not canonized before the fourth century CE.

In short, in the early stages of Christian liturgy we are faced with a reality in constant flux, precisely because it was still in the process of definition.

Once its fundamental structure crystallized, however, Christian liturgy underwent only minor changes until the Second Vatican Council. Naturally, this structural stability concerns only the Catholic confession; if we were to analyse the other Christian denominations present in Europe (Anglicanism, Calvinism, Protestantism, etc.), we would find liturgies very different from what we

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63 *Act. Ap.*, 2.42-46

64 Anonimous, *Didaché*, 14.1

65 St. Augustin, *Letter to Aurelius*, 22.4

66 Tertullianus, *Apology*, 39

are accustomed to. A near-universal point of convergence, however, is the centrality of Sacred Scripture, to whose interpretation and exegesis the celebration is dedicated, and of the Eucharist, a symbolic rite of breaking bread directly transmitted, as said, from Jesus of Nazareth to his apostles.
Everything that revolves around these two elements is, by contrast, open to interpretation and therefore to modification; suffice it to think, in this regard, of the Calvinist confession, which eliminated every form of song from the Mass, considering it a distraction from the exegesis of Scripture.
As far as the Catholic confession is concerned, on which we will focus from now on, we may identify four main moments in the Eucharistic liturgy which together form its skeleton and primary structure.
Every liturgy opens with the introductory rites, during which the celebrant enters the area around the altar. This is followed by the Liturgy of the Word, that is, the reading of three passages chosen from Scripture; then comes the Liturgy of the Eucharist, the breaking of bread and consecration of wine before the entire community of the faithful. Finally, the rites of conclusion or dismissal take place.
Particular attention should be paid to the third moment, the most important of the entire liturgy.

The Eucharist, as noted, is the element around which the whole meaning of the liturgy revolves. It is also in this moment that the greatest mystery of Catholic liturgy occurs: the transubstantiation of the bread into the body and the wine into the blood of Christ.
The term *transubstantiation* derives from the Latin *trans* + *substantia* and indicates therefore a change of substance of a given object; in this case, it is used to indicate the substantial change of bread into the body of Christ and wine into his blood. The first to use this term in relation to this miracle effected by the Mass was Pope Alexander III, whose words were later taken up by Thomas Aquinas:

"This sacrament differs from the other sacraments in two ways. First, because it is accomplished by the consecration of the matter; whereas the other sacraments are accomplished by the use of consecrated matter. Secondly, because in the other sacraments the consecration of the matter consists solely in a blessing, by which the matter receives instrumentally a spiritual power that can pass from the living, sentient instrument (the minister) into inanimate instruments. By contrast, in this sacrament the consecration of the matter consists in a miraculous conversion of the substance, which God alone can accomplish."[67]

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[67] St. T. Aequinas, *Summa Theologiae*, III, 78.1. English translation by the author.

Transubstantiation thus implies a real change of substance, brought about through the consecration of the two elements representing the body and blood of Christ.

If the dogma of transubstantiation was, at least originally, universally recognized, no such concord has been found among the various currents regarding the precise moment at which this change of substance is to be held to occur. According to the Orthodox Church, such transformation takes place at the moment when the priest invokes the presence of God through the Holy Spirit, immediately before the Eucharist proper. Catholic doctrine, on the other hand, identifies in the words *hoc est enim corpus meum*, pronounced by the priest during the Eucharistic prayer, the exact moment at which this change of substance takes place.

The problem of transubstantiation was at the centre of philosophical and liturgical debate for several centuries, to the point of being dogmatically defined in 1551 at the Council of Trent, whose proceedings state:

"[...] with the consecration of the bread and wine, the conversion of the whole substance of the bread into the substance of the Body of Christ our Lord, and of the whole substance of the wine into the substance of His Blood, is brought about. And this conversion is, by the holy Catholic Church, suitably and properly called transubstantiation."[68]

Faith in transubstantiation has not, at least within Catholicism, undergone transformation or alteration, whereas it has been completely abandoned by Protestant confessions.

What matters most, however, is the philosophical debate that surrounds this phenomenon; unlike many other dogmas, transubstantiation has been the object of profound philosophical discussions. Over the centuries, authors have sought to provide a logical justification for the modes of transformation of the bread and wine's substance. In particular, with regard to the transformation of substance, they asked whether consecration could generate the divine substance or merely summon it. The question was partially resolved with Duns Scotus, who theorised an annihilation of the bread followed by an addition (*adductio*) of the divine substance[69].

We may therefore affirm that in this case liturgy was the premise of rational debate, and not vice versa, as usually happens when one attempts to crystallize, in highly symbolic gestures and words, mysteries that reason cannot fully comprehend.

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68 Catechism of the Catholic Church, n.1376

69 cfr. M. McCord Adams, *Dans Scutus on two types of transubstantiation,* October 2010

A particular mention must be made of the terminological similarity between the classical and Christian worlds embodied in the word *hostia*, which we have already analysed in the preceding section. The term, in Christianity as well, designates precisely the matter of a *sacrificium*, which in this case is Eucharistic.

It is therefore more than plausible to seek to identify within Christian liturgy pre-Christian elements that have remained unchanged over the centuries, of which the presence of the *hostia* is only one example.

We have seen, in summary, that although Christian liturgy originates in Jewish celebration and took shape in the early centuries of Church history, it nonetheless drew some of its structural elements also from Roman tradition, integrating and resemanticizing them in the light of its own doctrine.

Despite the different interpretations and transformations liturgy has undergone over the centuries, we can still identify certain fundamental elements, among which the presence of an annual liturgical calendar and the celebration of sacraments, that is, particular liturgies celebrated only on specific occasions.

Taken as a whole, Catholic liturgy may be regarded as a kind of "service in the temple", during which an ordained priest enables the community of the faithful to attain a union in spirit with God through the reception and contact with the body of Christ.

Conclusion

This brief overview of ritual practice—from its anthropological foundations to its expressions in the ancient Mediterranean and early Christianity—reveals a persistent human need to structure the unpredictable, negotiate the presence of the sacred, and articulate the relationship between order and contingency. Across these contexts, ritual emerges not as an archaic residue but as a flexible grammar through which communities seek meaning, coherence, and connection with realities conceived as transcendent or extra-human.

Magic, sacrifice, and liturgical celebration, though often distinguished in scholarly discourse, participate in a shared symbolic economy. Whether in the Roman *immolatio*, the Greek communal banquet, the Egyptian manipulation of divine forces, or the Christian Eucharist, ritual acts function as mediating devices capable of transforming objects, spaces, and human states of consciousness. The logic of redundancy, the simplification of language, and the structuring of time persist from antiquity to the liturgical systems of later religious traditions.

At the same time, each historical context reinterprets inherited patterns according to its theological, social, and cosmological assumptions. The passage from ancient sacrifice to Christian liturgy illustrates such a resemanticisation: what once marked the redistribution of power between gods and

humans became, in the Christian framework, a sacramental union oriented towards salvation and divine presence. Continuity thus coexists with rupture, and symbolic forms migrate across cultures while acquiring new meanings.

It is within this broader dynamic of transformation that contemporary reinterpretations of ritual—such as those found in modern spiritual or philosophical movements—may be situated.

Ophidism, for instance, approaches liturgy not as a replication of ancient forms but as a reflective re-engagement with the symbolic core of Mediterranean rituality. By emphasising transformation, tension, and cyclical renewal, Ophidian liturgical thought reconstitutes traditional structures within a monotheistic and contemplative framework. In doing so, it illustrates how ritual continues to serve as a privileged medium for negotiating identity, cosmology, and meaning in the post-secular world.

The comparative trajectory traced in this study therefore not only clarifies the historical development of liturgy, but also offers an analytical foundation for understanding how contemporary systems—Ophidian or otherwise—revive, reinterpret, and reconfigure the ancient grammar of ritual to address new spiritual and intellectual horizons.